The five stories in this collection represent different facets of Poe’s writing – three of them (The Fall of the House of Usher, The Maelström and The Barrel of Amontillado) are straightforward horror stories, rich in atmosphere and gothic detail. The other two (The Murders in the Rue Morgue and The Stolen Letter) are detective stories, amongst the earliest examples of this popular genre.

In The Fall of the House of Usher, a man visits a former schoolfriend and finds that both he and his sister, Madeline, are near to death, suffering from a strange illness that seems in some way connected to the house. A few days later, Madeline dies and the two men bury her in a tomb under the house. However, it transpires that she is merely in a coma and they have buried her alive. She comes back in a terrible storm and both she and her brother die, bringing an end to the Usher family and also to the house itself, which crashes to the ground.

In The Maelström, a fisherman relates how he and his brothers were sucked into a terrible whirlpool and how he alone managed to escape.

The Barrel of Amontillado introduces us to the madman Montresor who calmly buries a friend alive as a punishment for some real or imagined wrong.

The Murders in the Rue Morgue and The Stolen Letter are detective stories starring C. Auguste Dupin, a detective in the Sherlock Holmes mould who is able to solve crimes which have baffled the French police. The first involves the ‘murder’ of two women by an escaped orang-utan, the second the recovery of a letter which an evil politician is using to blackmail an important lady.

Both The Fall of the House of Usher and The Murders in the Rue Morgue have been made into successful films, the former starring the master of horror Vincent Price, the latter very loosely based on the Poe story.

About Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe was an American poet, fiction writer and critic, best known for his unforgettable tales of terror.

He was born in Boston, USA in 1809. When he was two, his parents died and he was brought up by a Virginia businessman, John Allan and his wife. He lived in England with the Allans from 1815 to 1820 before returning to the USA. He attended the University of Virginia, but had to leave early because of a dispute with his foster father.

Poe’s talent for writing was evident at an early age and his first published works were collections of poems. After a period in the army, he moved to Baltimore to live with an aunt and continued to write, working for newspapers to earn a living. He then started to submit short stories to magazines and his first book of stories Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque was published in 1839.

Throughout his life, Poe struggled with poverty, alcohol and madness. His ten-year marriage to his cousin, Virginia, ended with her death in 1847 and he began to drink even more. Two years later, he was found unconscious in the street after a bout of heavy drinking. He did not recover.

Poe’s reputation continued to grow after his death and his books became especially popular in Europe. The French writer Baudelaire was a great admirer of Poe’s work and translated many of his stories and poems into French. His work is still popular and very widely read today.

Background and Themes

Horror stories became extremely popular in the early nineteenth century after the publication of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818). This popularity has continued to the present day and though most of our thrills today come from big-budget films with amazing special effects, horror fiction by writers such as Stephen King still tops the best-seller lists. In the nineteenth century there was no shortage of novels and short stories with tales of terror, mystery, murder and suspense to excite and thrill a readership eager for new experiences. Though many have not stood the test of time, those written by Poe have remained popular and have not lost their power to chill.

Another genre for which people seem to have an insatiable appetite is the detective story and, again, though the rise of cinema and television has provided more outlets for enjoyment of this genre, whole sections of bookshops are still devoted to the crime novel. The device adopted by Poe (and also by Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes) of an extremely intelligent hero who is able to solve cases which have baffled the police by impressive powers of observation and deduction is one which continues to feature heavily in modern detective fiction.

It is noticeable that several themes recur in Poe’s work. One of these is madness, another the fear of being buried alive. Both are evident in the stories in this collection.

In The Fall of the House of Usher, the narrator has not seen his friends Roderick and Madeline for many years and is struck by the wildness of their appearance and the strangeness of their behaviour. Roderick tells him that he believes that he is losing his mind. After they have buried Madeline, his madness gets worse until he reveals the terrible secret that he knows he has buried his sister alive. In this story, the madness is observed and described by an outsider who is himself sane. In The Barrel of Amontillado, the narrator himself is mad and calmly describes his actions and motivation to the increasingly horrified reader. It is known that Poe himself suffered bouts of madness throughout his short life and struggled to maintain his sanity.

Both The Fall of the House of Usher and The Barrel of...
Amontillado feature burying people alive, perhaps one of the most potent images of terror. In the former, Madeline falls into some kind of coma or cataleptic trance which the men mistake for death. She is placed in a tomb under the house with a heavy metal door. Terrible sounds in the house reveal that Madeline has been buried alive and is clawing her way back into the house. In the latter, the narrator, Montresor, tells how he tricks his so-called friend into going deep into a cave in the cellars under the house. There he ties him up and slowly bricks him in by building a wall. Poe builds a tremendous feeling of suspense as Montresor leads Fortunato on through the cellars and the horror increases as the victim gradually realises the fate in store for him.

In some ways the experience of the fisherman in 'The Maelström' is similar to being buried alive. Out fishing with his brothers, a sudden storm causes them to miss the fifteen-minute gap when it is safe to cross the area where the whirlpool develops. As a result they are sucked down into it and though he speaks of six hours of fear, he also admits to a fascination with the whirlpool and a desire to experience the feeling of what it is like to be inside one.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

1. Ask students to work in groups and to decide on the most frightening story they know. They prepare an outline of the story to tell other groups.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

'The Fall of the House of Usher'

1. The narrator says 'We cannot always understand why some things scare us'. Put students into groups and ask them to discuss whether they agree with him or not. What kind of things do they find scary?

2. Put students in pairs and ask them to role play the conversation. Ask the narrator to go and see Roderick Usher's doctor after he left the house and told him what happened. They role play the conversation.

'The Maelström'

Ask students to work in small groups. First they list the ways the experience in the whirlpool changed the fisherman. Then they act out the scene where he is rescued from the sea by his friends.

'The Barrel of Amontillado'

In small groups, students say what happens after the end of the story. Give them these questions to help them:

- What do they find there?
- Do they work out what happened to Fortunato?
- Is Montresor still alive? Do they punish him?

'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'

Put students in pairs. Ask them to role play:
(a) a conversation between Dupin and the Chief of Police when Dupin tells him how the ‘murders’ were done.
(b) a conversation between the Chief of Police and the sailor.

'The Stolen Letter'

Put students in pairs. Ask them to role play a conversation between the Minister and the lady whose letter he stole. He says she must pay him a lot of money or he will show the letter to her husband. She asks him to give back her letter.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Put students in groups. Ask them how they would film one of the stories in the book. Which actors would they choose to play the main parts? What music would they choose? What special effects would they need? Where would they film it?
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Activities before reading the book

1 Read the Introduction at the front of the book and find the answers to these questions.
   (a) When was Edgar Allan Poe born?
   (b) How old was he when he died?
   (c) What was the name of his wife?
   (d) What was the title of his first book of stories?

2 Look at the picture on the front of the book. Which of these words do you think describe the woman? Look up any new words in your dictionary.
   weak   young   mad   sick   ugly   dangerous   wild
   angry   healthy   thin   strange   frightening

Activities while reading the book

'THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF Usher'

Before reading the story

Look at the picture on the front cover and the picture of the house on page 2. Guess which of these words you will read in the story.
   sadness   mystery   storm   tomb   sunshine   madman

Talk about your answers with another student. Try to decide what the story is about.

After reading the story

1 Close your book. Choose the right ending for these sentences.
   (a) The writer visited Roderick because
      (i) he heard he was sick.
      (ii) he got a letter from him.
      (iii) the doctor asked him to visit.
   (b) When the two men put Madeline in the tomb
      (i) her face had more colour.
      (ii) there was blood on her face.
      (iii) her face was very pale.
   (c) The noises the two men heard were
      (i) the wind and rain on the windows.
      (ii) not real, just in their minds.
      (iii) Madeline coming out of the tomb.

2 What two things are called 'the House of Usher'? Why is the story called 'The Fall of the House of Usher'?

'THE MAELSTRÖM'

Before reading the story

1 Have you ever seen a whirlpool? Where was it? Were you frightened by it?

2 Look at the pictures on pages 13 and 15.
   (a) Describe the pictures and say how you think the people in them are feeling.
   (b) The man on the right on page 13 is the same man as the one on the left on page 15. How is he different? What do you think changed him?

After reading the story

1 Are these sentences right or wrong?
   (a) The man with the white hair isn't really very old.
   (b) The man had three brothers.
   (c) The men knew that a storm was coming.
   (d) The whirlpool made a very loud noise.
   (e) The old man escaped because he tied himself to something light.
   (f) His older brother also escaped from the whirlpool.

2 Choose the right answer.
   (a) When was it safe to cross the Maelström?
      (i) For fifteen minutes at the turn of the tide.
      (ii) When the weather was fine and sunny.
      (iii) When the wind was good and they could sail quickly.
   (b) What happened to the man's younger brother?
      (i) He went down into the whirlpool with the boat.
      (ii) He jumped into the water and escaped.
      (iii) The wind knocked him into the water and he died.
   (c) Why did the man tie himself to a water barrel and jump into the water?
      (i) Because he wanted to see the inside of the whirlpool.
      (ii) Because he realized that light things went up to the sea again.
      (iii) Because his brother was holding the metal ring on the boat.

'THE BARREL OF AMONTILLADO'

Before reading the story

Look at the picture on page 23. Who do you think the two men are? What is happening and why?
After reading the story
1. Put these things in the order they happen in the story.
   (a) Montresor told Fortunato about the barrel of wine he had bought.
   (b) Montresor tied Fortunato to the metal rings in the cave.
   (c) Montresor and Fortunato went into the caves.
   (d) Montresor met Fortunato in the street.
   (e) Montresor finished the wall and left the caves.
   (f) Fortunato began to scream.
   (g) Montresor gave Fortunato some wine to drink.
   (h) Montresor started to build a wall in front of the small cave.

2. Montresor suggests many times that he can ask Luchesi to say whether the wine is Amontillado or not. Why do you think he does this?

'THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE'

Before reading the story
Look at the picture on page 27. What can you see? What do you think has happened?

After reading the story
1. Answer these questions.
   (a) Why was it strange that no one knew the nationality of the person with the high voice?
   (b) How did the orang-utan get into the apartment?
   (c) Where was the body of Madame L'Espanaye?
      How did it get there?
   (d) Why did Dupin think the owner of the orang-utan was a sailor?
   (e) Why did the sailor bring the orang-utan to Paris?
   (f) Why was the Chief of Police not happy at the end?

2. Match the names of the people with the endings to make correct sentences.
   (a) Dupin ...
      (i) lived in the Rue Morgue with her daughter.
   (b) Henri Duval ...
      (ii) solved the mystery of the murders.
   (c) Madame L'Espanaye ...
      (iii) was the first policeman who went to the house.
   (d) Isidore Muset ...
      (iv) washed clothes for Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter.
   (e) Pauline Duborg ...
      (v) lived next door to Madame L'Espanaye.

' THE STOLEN LETTER'

Before reading the story
Look at the picture on page 46. Who do you think the people are? What are they doing? What does the man on the left have in his hand? What is on the table?

After reading the story
1. Choose the right ending for these sentences.
   (a) The minister stole the letter because
      (i) he could use it to make the woman do what he wanted.
      (ii) he could sell it for a lot of money to a foreign government.
      (iii) the letter was addressed to him.
   (b) The police didn't find the letter because
      (i) the minister hid it in a secret hiding place.
      (ii) the minister hid it inside the furniture.
      (iii) the minister didn't hide it, but made it look different.
   (c) Dupin took the letter from the minister's room
      (i) when the minister was looking for his hat.
      (ii) when the minister was looking out of the window.
      (iii) when the police were searching for it.

2. Answer these questions.
   (a) How did the Chief of Police know that the minister still had the letter?
   (b) How did Dupin know that there would be a gunshot in the street?
   (c) Why did Dupin put another letter in the letter rack?

Activities after reading the book
1. Which story did you like best? Which frightened you most?
2. Choose one of the stories and write a different ending for it.